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P A P E R

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# Polarized Politics and Policy Consequences

Diana Epstein, John D. Graham

Sponsored by donors to the Pardee RAND Graduate School,  
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## Preface

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This occasional paper examines the causes, dimensions, and consequences of partisan political polarization in the United States. It also discusses potential remedies and defines a future research agenda for social scientists and policy analysts. The paper should be of interest to members of Congress, presidential candidates, civil servants, political scientists, reporters, and stakeholders seeking to influence public policy.

Expert reviewers assisted the authors in generating the final version of the paper presented here. These reviewers were Pietro Nivola (Vice President and Director, Governance Studies, The Brookings Institution) and Chris Nelson (Senior Political Scientist, RAND Corporation).

The authors are grateful to Pietro Nivola and David Brady for inviting us to attend the Brookings Institution/Hoover Institution authors conference on *Red and Blue Nation? Vol. 2: Consequences and Correction of America's Polarized Politics*, held at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University on January 25–26, 2007. We have benefited greatly from the presentations and discussions at this conference and from reading *Red and Blue Nation? Vol. 1: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

The research contained in this report was made possible by the generosity of donors to the Pardee RAND Graduate School, particularly Paul Volcker and Eugene and Maxine Rosenfeld. The authors appreciate the hard work of Elizabeth Brown, Jane McClure, and Silvia Montoya in their review of several early versions of the draft manuscript.



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## Summary

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America's two political parties have become more distinct in the past few decades, deepening a divide that has come to be known as polarization. The split has been particularly apparent in the "political elites," by which we mean members of Congress, party activists, and other influential players in the political process. Ordinary voters are also sorting themselves more tightly into the parties that align with their core values, and ideological concerns are playing a larger role in politics. As the parties have moved further apart, there has been a marked decline in legislative centrists who bridge the parties and broker crucial compromises. Within each party, the members of Congress have become more internally homogeneous in voting and in their underlying beliefs.

Polarization has numerous causes, including the partisan realignment of the South, changing institutional procedures in Congress, the growth in income inequality, balkanization of the mass media, and the rise of new interest groups. It has a variety of different consequences—some positive, some negative, some empirically supported, and some only hypothesized. The purpose of this occasional paper is to review the dimensions, causes, and consequences of political polarization in the United States; to discuss potential remedies; and then to define a future research agenda to help better understand the phenomenon.

To elucidate the impact of polarization on the day-to-day lives of U.S. citizens, the research community may need to modify its benchmarks for what constitutes a successful public policy. We also need a better understanding of how polarization affects the quantity and substance of rulemaking, judicial decisions, and legislation, including policies at the state and local levels of government. Special attention needs to be directed to how polarization is complicating long-term policy challenges (e.g., Social Security and health care reform) that can only be resolved through true bipartisan collaboration. Finally, we ask whether polarization is changing how scientific and policy-analytic information is—or isn't—generated and used by decisionmakers and stakeholders.



## Polarization in the United States

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### Introduction

The subject of polarization is pervasive these days: on the minds of academics and pundits who dissect voter opinions; in newspaper accounts of congressional vitriol; and as the not-so-subtle subtext of media maps that depict a so-called red state–blue state split, to name but three examples. The political parties have grown further apart on ideological grounds, and the potential for compromise on serious problems within our country seems to have diminished. Ordinary Americans are sorting themselves more tightly into parties that align with their core beliefs, and it has become increasingly difficult for candidates to win elections in geographic regions that the other party has traditionally controlled. Cultural concerns are playing a consequential role in politics, and activists who are passionate about polarizing issues often define which topics land on the agendas of political leaders.

Polarization is a complex topic. It partly reflects a growing divergence in Congress between the Republican and Democratic parties, and partly a division in ideologies that encompasses a wide range of economic and social issues. Polarization is more than mere disagreement, but it is also not as dire as two sides engaged in an all-out battle for supremacy. In this paper, we seek answers to the following questions:

- Who is polarized? Is it political elites, ordinary Americans, or both?
- What drives polarization, and what are its consequences for our democracy?
- Is polarization a serious problem, and, if so, what are some potential solutions?

### Dimensions

Polarization can take several forms. For instance, it can manifest as a bimodal distribution of ideologies, rather than as a left-to-right continuum, or as the decline of deliberation between people on opposite sides, which may in part be due to the declining prevalence of centrists who can forge a middle ground between extreme ideological camps. Some scholars argue that opportunities for honest discussion are reduced in today's polarized environment, both among elected officials (as documented by the decline of cross-party dialogue in Congress) and in communities (where like-minded people tend to cluster geographically, with fewer institutional

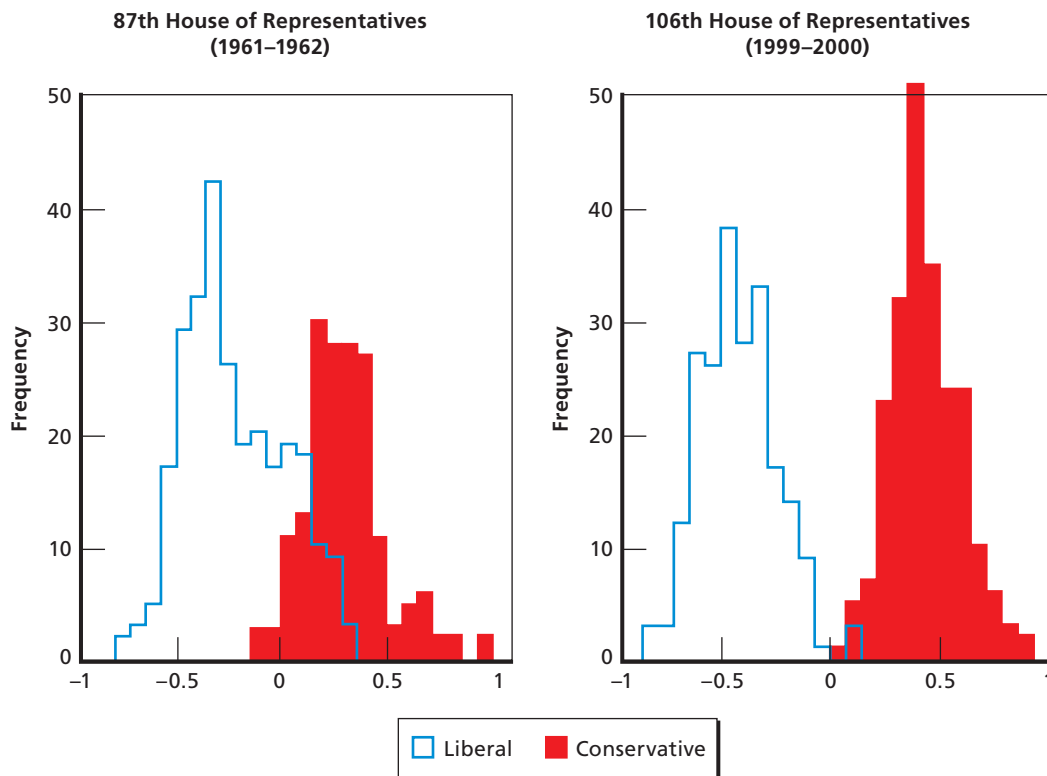
mechanisms for meaningful group association). Polarization also may affect particular policy issues in different ways (e.g., foreign affairs more so than agricultural programs).

## Polarization of Political Elites

Because polarization involves many unknowns, it is useful to begin the discussion with what we know to be true. The split has been particularly apparent among “political elites,” by which we mean members of Congress, party activists, and other influential players in the political process. Partisan polarization in Congress is defined by political scientists as the ideological distance between the median members of each party in the House and Senate. Ideological distance is usually measured by congressional roll-call votes; a widely used system defines  $-1$  as most liberal and  $+1$  as most conservative. Each member is assigned a value between  $-1$  and  $+1$ , based on a characteristic scale that factors in all his or her roll-call votes in a given session.

Figure 1.1 shows the distribution of House members on the  $-1$  to  $+1$  ideology scale, with the 87th House (1961–1962) on the left and the 106th House (1999–2000) on the right. Within each party, the membership has become more similar in voting and in underlying beliefs; in other words, the parties have become more internally homogeneous.<sup>1</sup> As the parties

**Figure 1.1**  
Polarization in Congress from the 1960s to 2000



SOURCE: Fiorina et al. (2006).

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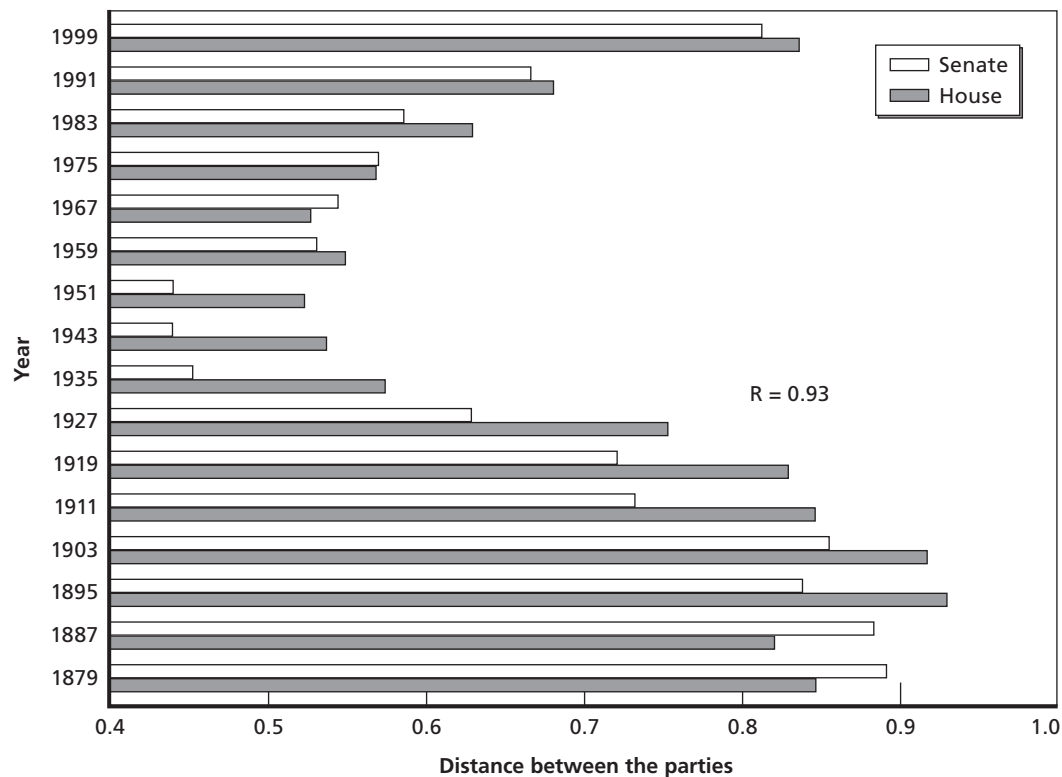
<sup>1</sup> One should avoid overinterpretations of roll-call votes, since votes reflect a mixture of policy preferences, pressures from constituent and party leaders, and strategic considerations.

have moved further apart ideologically, there has also been a marked decline in centrists who bridge the parties and broker crucial compromises.

Figure 1.2 displays this divergence in ideologies for both the House and the Senate. This graph demonstrates that the parties were even farther apart in the late 19th century, following the Civil War. In short, it would be historically inaccurate to suggest that today's intense polarization is unprecedented. However, a dramatic increase in polarization from the 1970s to the present is apparent, and it is this sharp rise that has sparked the interest of scholars and congressional observers (Jacobson, 2007a).

Unlike past eras when the parties tended to polarize on only one major issue at a time (for example, slavery and civil rights), the current parties are divided on a variety of issues in American politics (Layman et al., 2006). This type of division—on multiple topics—has been termed conflict extension. Rather than a “cycling-through” of issues where new ones replace old ones, it seems as though the list of issues that divide the parties has grown larger over time. Nonetheless, the increase in ideological homogeneity in the parties means that almost all political conflict in Congress can now be thought of along the liberal–conservative dimension. Exceptions include issues such as agricultural and transportation policy, which still tend to be dominated by regional or local constituent interests.

**Figure 1.2**  
**Party Polarization 1879–1999:**  
**Distance Between the Parties on the Liberal–Conservative Dimension**



SOURCE: [http://voteview.org/Polarized\\_America.htm](http://voteview.org/Polarized_America.htm)

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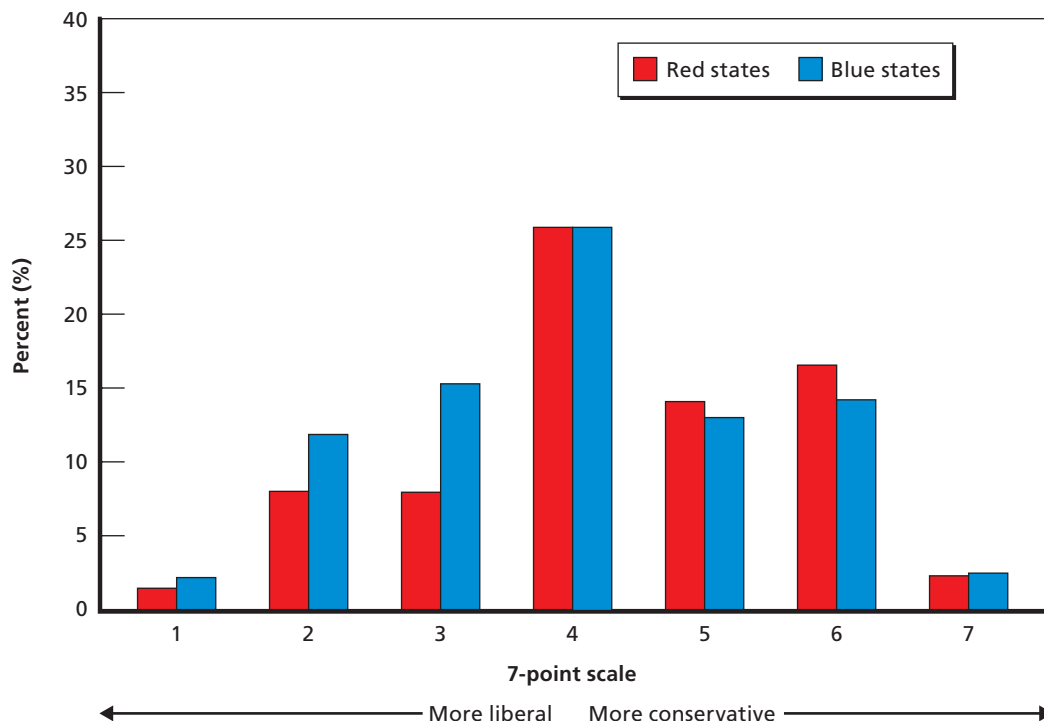


## Polarization of the General Public

Evidence of growing political polarization among ordinary American citizens is mixed. Some contend that most Americans are moderates (Fiorina et al., 2006; Jacobson, 2000). For example, Figure 1.3 shows that the general public's self-reported ideological placement on a 7-point liberal–conservative scale looked remarkably similar in the red (predominantly Republican) and blue (predominantly Democratic) states in 2004.

It also appears that the number of moderate Americans has stayed relatively constant over the past three decades: One study showed that in the 1970s, 68 percent of House voters rated themselves a 3, 4, or 5 on the 7-point scale; in the 1990s, that was down only slightly to 60 percent (Jacobson, 2000). According to exit polls from the National Election Studies, the average number of moderate voters over the past 30 years has been 47 percent, and in 2004 that number was 45 percent (Galston and Nivola, 2006). Some scholars argue that most Americans fall in the middle of the political spectrum, and that “both red and blue state residents are basically centrists” (Fiorina et al., 2006). In contrast to the red versus blue story portrayed in the popular media, there is evidence that in fact most Americans hold quite similar positions, even on issues such as abortion and gay marriage. It may be that in fact most states are actually best described as purple (Galston and Nivola, 2006).

**Figure 1.3**  
**Ideological Self-Placement of Respondents Living in Red and Blue States, 2004**



SOURCE: Fiorina et al. (2006), with data from the 2004 National Election Study.

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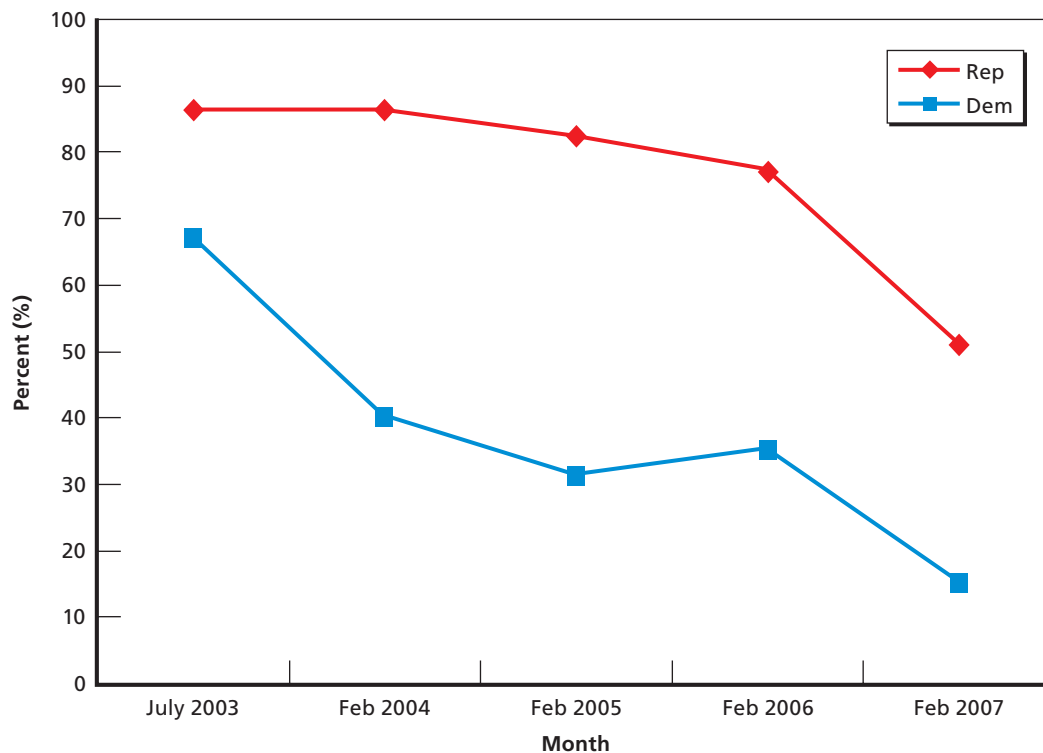
On the other hand, it does appear that at least some significant percentage of the electorate has moved further apart on certain salient issues on which it is harder to find common ground. For example, Figure 1.4 shows that self-identified Republicans and Democrats differ dramatically when asked to evaluate progress concerning the war in Iraq (Jacobson, 2007b).

Even if most Americans are moderates, it is undoubtedly the case that the party activists and campaign donors have become more polarized, as have party leaders. The activists have the most intense preferences; work hard on campaigns and issues; and have the most influence, especially in primary elections. Primary candidates respond to their base electorates in order to get on the ballot for the general election. By the time the general election comes around, moderate challengers have been defeated and voters are often forced to pick between two extreme choices.

The loss of moderate candidates could make the American electorate appear more polarized than it really is. Voter attitudes could be mostly centrist while the elites impose a more polarized agenda (Fiorina et al., 2006). More simply, it could be that most Americans are not paying much attention to politics, which lets the elites call the shots (Layman et al., 2006).

What is beyond dispute is that party and ideology have become more closely linked in America. As opposed to the “tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum” parties of the past, the two parties now represent clear differences in ideologies and policy priorities. Voters tend to associate more strongly with one political party or the other according to their own beliefs, a phenomenon that experts refer to as “sorting” (Jacobson, 2000). It used to be the case that many liberals

**Figure 1.4**  
Percentage of Americans Who Think the War in Iraq Is Going “Very” or “Fairly” Well



SOURCE: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=304>

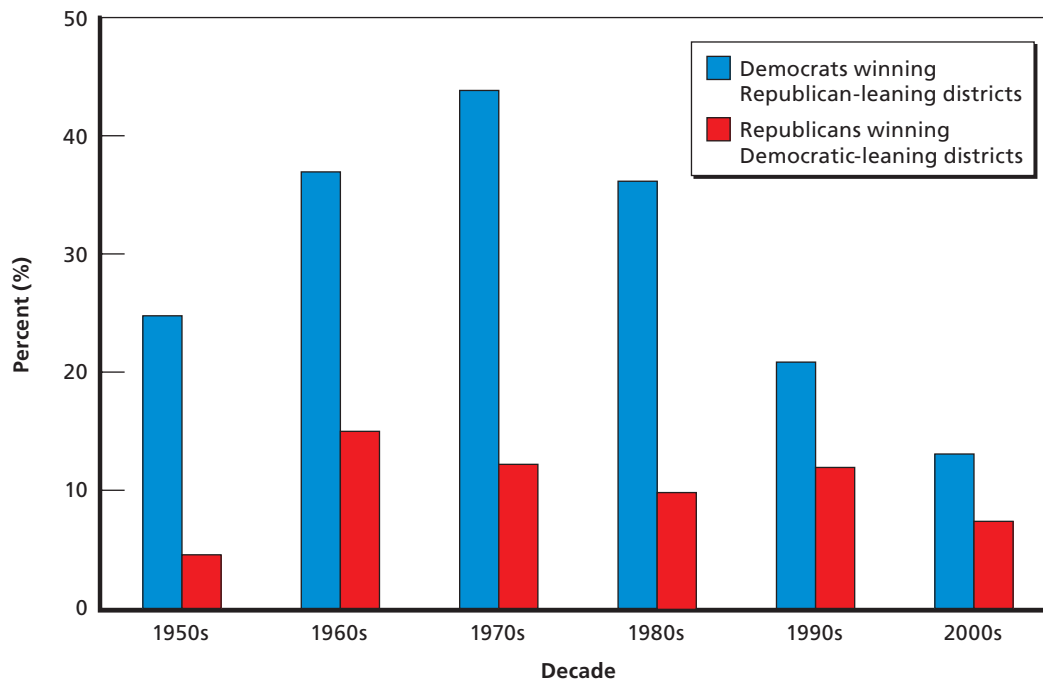
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and conservatives could fit in either party, but now one usually finds conservatives aligned with the Republicans and liberals aligned with the Democrats. According to Fiorina et al. (2006), “Those who affiliate with a party today are more likely to affiliate with the ideologically ‘correct’ party than they were in earlier periods.” This type of sorting does not necessarily suggest a change in preferences; it may simply be a stronger linkage of policy preferences to political parties (Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006).

More voters are sticking consistently with their respective parties, as evidenced by the recent sharp decline in ticket-splitting (i.e., voting for candidates of different parties in the same election) (Jacobson, 2000). There are fewer close races (with the exception of 2006), and it has become rare for districts to diverge in their presidential and congressional party preferences. Figures 1.5 and 1.6 illustrate these trends: Fewer candidates win elections in a district that leans toward the other party (Figure 1.5), and fewer House seats are decided within a narrow 45–55 percent range (Figure 1.6).

Partisan gerrymandering of districts may be playing a role, but it is likely only part of the story since our mobile citizenry is increasingly choosing to self-segregate geographically. “The electoral process of choosing our representatives one winner-take-all district at a time is carving our nation into red and blue one-party fiefdoms” and, in most states, “demography has become destiny” (Hill, 2005).

**Figure 1.5**  
**Winning in a District That Leans the Other Way**

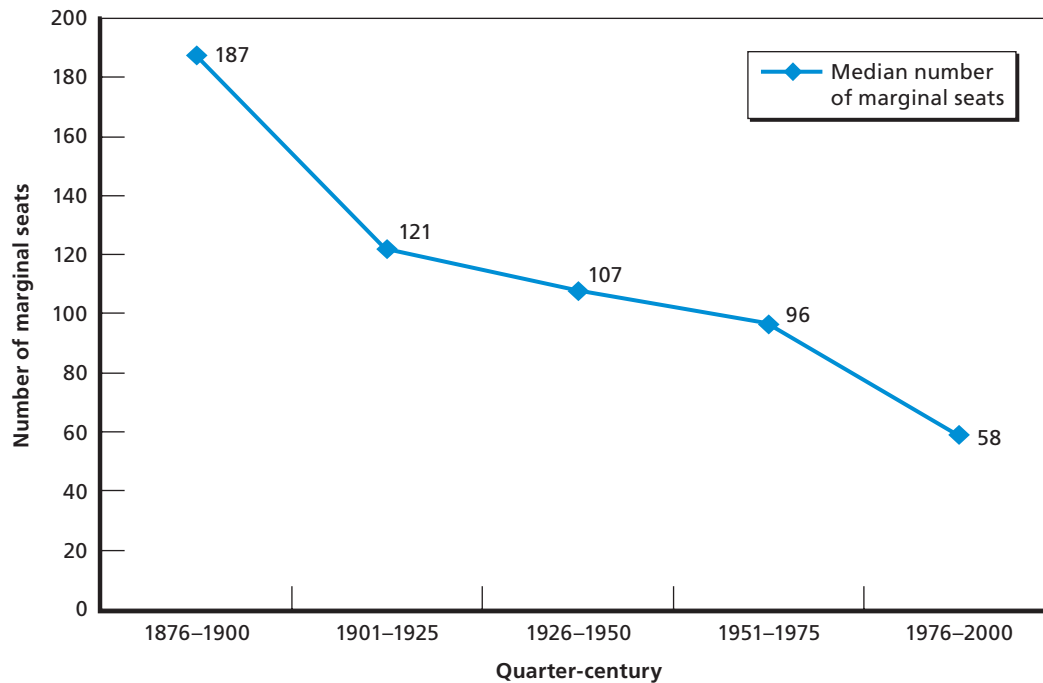


SOURCE: Nivola and Brady (2006).

NOTE: “Leaning” districts are those that had a district-level presidential vote at least 2 percentage points higher than the national average in that election.

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**Figure 1.6**  
**Number of Marginal House Seats, 1876–2004**



SOURCE: Nivola and Brady (2006), originally from Campbell et al. (2005).

NOTE: Marginal seats are those decided within a range of 45 to 55 percent of the two-party district vote. Elections since 2000 are included in 1976–2000.

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## 2006 Midterm Elections

The 2006 midterm elections produced sizeable gains for the Democrats in both the House and Senate. Exit polls suggest that a now-familiar pattern of polarization occurred among voters: Most Republicans voted for House and Senate candidates from their party, while most Democrats voted for their party's candidates. Although the turnout produced an electorate slightly more favorable to the Democrats, the biggest difference in 2006 compared with 2004 and 2002 was the large percentage of independents who voted Democratic (e.g., Republican candidates gained the support of a significant percentage of independents in 2002 and 2004, but lost independents' support in 2006). According to exit polls, Democratic House candidates won 59 percent of the independent vote in 2006 compared with 52 percent and 46 percent in 2004 and 2002, respectively (Jacobson, 2007b).

It is difficult to say whether the 2006 election will slow or reverse the growing polarization in Congress, particularly considering that the major factors contributing to the large Republican losses were the unpopularity of President Bush and the war in Iraq. If the election had not been widely viewed as a referendum on these issues, it is unclear whether public dissatisfaction with the performance of the Republican Congress and highly publicized scandals involving several members would have been enough to turn the public's favor toward the Democrats.

On one hand, the important role that independents played in the 2006 results may cause members of Congress to shift some of their focus to the less ideological interests of independents and moderate voters. Furthermore, some of the newly elected Democrats have conservative credentials and/or were elected in Republican-leaning districts. These factors may induce centrist behavior by some Democrats, and thus the ideological diversity of Democratic members may make it difficult for leaders to keep the party unified and polarized. On the other hand, the losses among Republicans in the House and Senate occurred disproportionately among the party's few remaining moderates. Thus, the Republican Party's ideological center of gravity may move further right, at least until the 2008 election clarifies whether the 2006 results simply reflected voters' disapproval of President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq.

## History and Causes

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### Characteristics

Congressional roll-call voting indicates that the political elites are polarized on many subjects, domestic as well as international. A generation ago, the breadth of partisan disputes was narrower. In the past, some topics were excluded from partisan disputes; it is possible that their growing incorporation into political party rhetoric has stimulated and aggravated polarization as each of the parties has taken a more decisive stance. According to Layman et al. (2006), “Racial and cultural concerns, which used to divide parties internally more than externally, now have joined economic and social welfare issues as clear sources of interparty cleavage and intraparty homogeneity.” The parties have polarized over race, abortion, school prayer, the rights of gay men and lesbians, and, increasingly, the conduct of foreign policy. Each of the parties has become strongly associated with a portfolio of positions that span a larger range of issues than was the case a few decades ago.

Regardless of whether the general public is as polarized as the elites are, what has unarguably changed is the recent alignment between opinions on social issues and political party affiliation. Where once a voter’s stance on matters such as abortion was independent of party affiliation, it now is much more likely to be a strong indicator of his or her party (Jacobson, 2007a). And the types of issues with which parties associate themselves may also influence polarization. For instance, it may be easier to reach compromise when the two sides can at least agree on the goal even if they disagree about how to achieve it. In contrast, “polarization around moral issues in which parties disagree about the fundamental outcomes to achieve is more potent than polarization around economic issues in which parties agree on economic or other policy goals” (Brady and Han, 2006).

Polling data show that the general public is most polarized on particularly salient issues such as taxes, the role of religion in public life, and the use of foreign and military power. Americans have become especially split since the mid-1980s on government spending and affirmative action (Hill, 2005); in turn, the Republican Party has utilized these divisions to push a targeted, conservative agenda. Furthermore, the presidency of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq have produced some of the most extreme levels of polarization in terms of presidential approval ratings and support of military actions ever recorded in the history of popular polling. The United States does not have a history of widespread partisan polarization in foreign policy, and this recent split over Iraq represents a significant break from the past (Jacobson, 2007a).

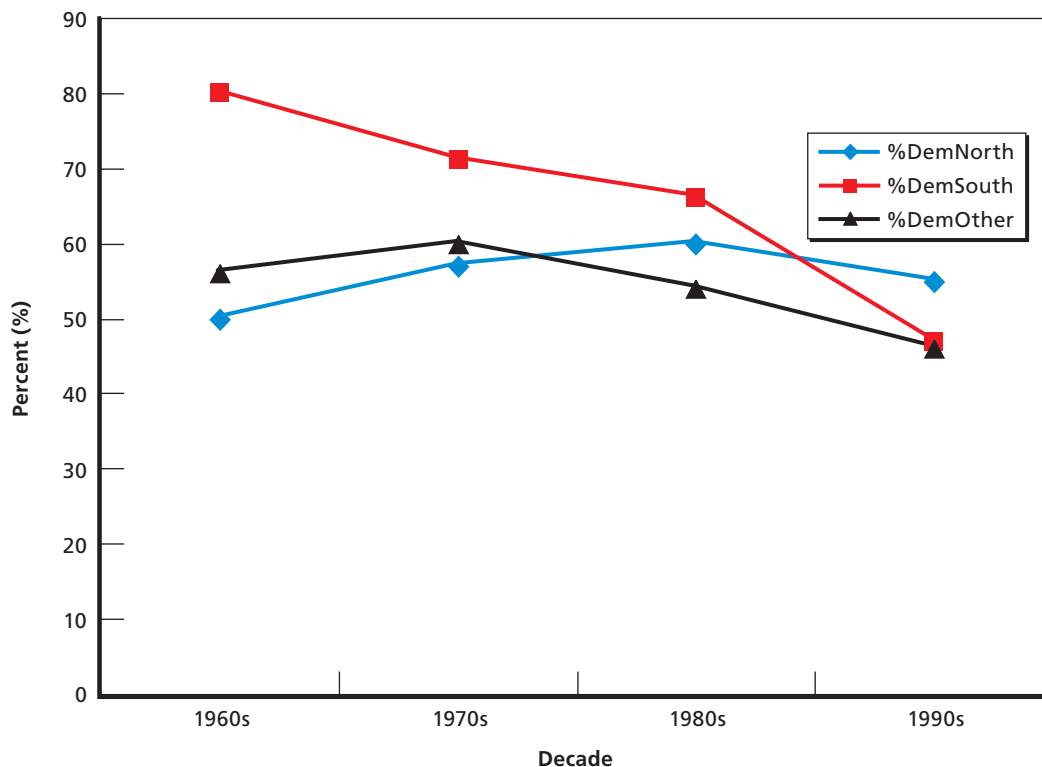
## Causes of Polarization

A variety of factors may help explain the increase in political polarization, including the rise of the Republican Party in the South and the demise of Republicans in the Northeast. On Capitol Hill, procedural changes in Congress such as the increased use of closed rules (those that limit debate and amendments) and the greater ability of party leaders to enforce discipline among rank-and-file members have sharpened party lines.

### Southern Realignment

Southern realignment is one of the most potent drivers of polarization; with the decrease in conservative Democrats and increase of Republicans in the region, the two parties have become more ideologically homogeneous and more concentrated in particular geographic regions of the country. In the 85th Congress (1957–1958), Southerners made up 45 percent of the Democrats in the Senate; by 1983 they made up just 23 percent. During roughly the same period, the percentage of Republican senators from New England and the Mid-Atlantic States dropped from 37 to 19 percent (Mann and Ornstein, 2006). A similar realignment occurred in the House: Figure 2.1 illustrates the dramatic change in Democratic House seats by region from the 1960s to the 1990s.

**Figure 2.1**  
Percentage of House Elections Won by Democrats, by Region



SOURCE: Stonecash et al. (2003).

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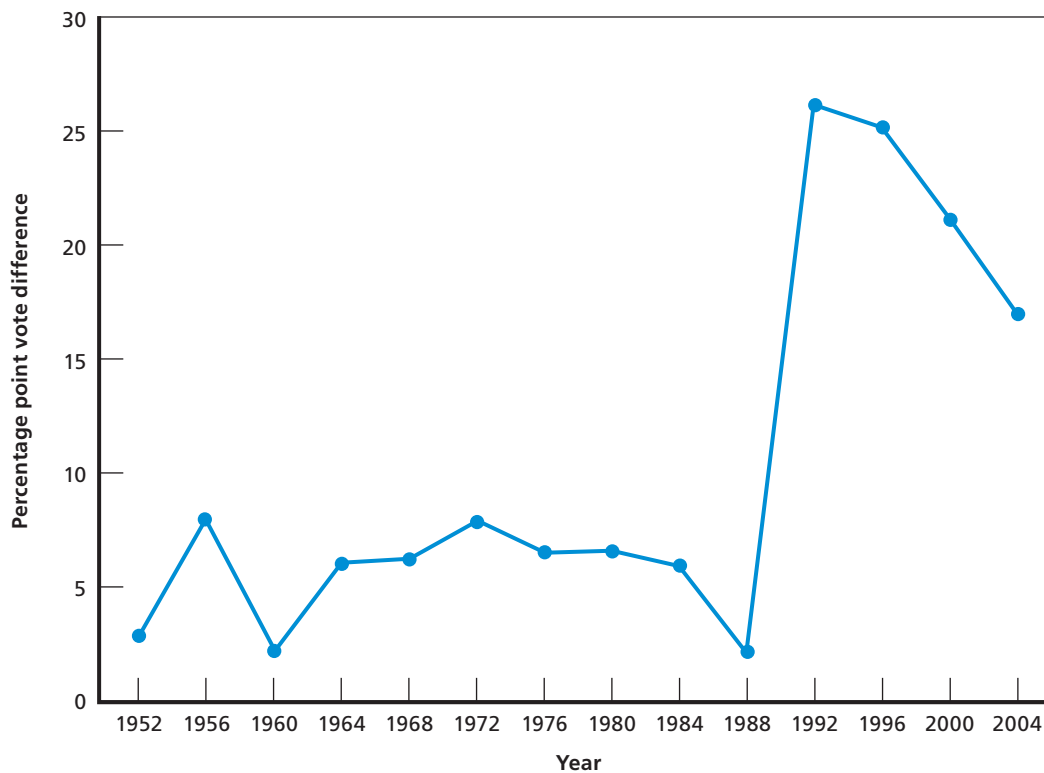
### Income and Education

The rise of both income inequality and immigration parallels that of polarization (McCarty et al., 2006), and these economic and social forces are exacerbating the divide. Each of the parties is now identified with particular economic and fiscal policies, and voter income has become increasingly tied to political party identification. Higher-income citizens tend to vote Republican, while those with lower incomes lean Democrat. In addition, those with lower incomes are more likely to be immigrant noncitizens who cannot vote at all, further intensifying polarization by income (McCarty et al., 2006). Education also plays a role, as educated citizens are more likely to be informed and involved in politics. According to Wilson (2006), “This extraordinary growth in schooling has produced an ever larger audience for political agitation.”

### Religion

The relationship between religion and politics is also changing with the rise of evangelical Christians and their strong ties to the Republican Party. This link between religious intensity and politics began around 1992; as shown below in Figure 2.2, a large gap has developed in the white Democratic vote between regular churchgoers and those who do not attend church regularly (Fiorina et al., 2006). Religious Christians tend to affiliate strongly with the Republican Party and more secular voters tend to find their place with the Democrats.

**Figure 2.2**  
**Democratic Presidential Vote Gap Between Regular Churchgoers and Nonattendees**



SOURCE: Fiorina et al. (2006), with data from American National Election Studies.

NOTE: Includes white voters only.

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In turn, the parties have begun to use highly targeted messaging to attract voters and capitalize on these differences. Issues driven by religion tend to be those in which it is harder to find common ground, thereby fueling polarization (Dionne, 2006).

### **Residential Segregation**

More Americans are becoming clustered in like-minded communities, and fewer participate in institutions and organizations that bring different kinds of people together. As we bond with those whose preferences and values are similar to our own, we build fewer social bridges to people with whom we might differ (Putnam, 2000). Residential segregation by race and class, facilitated in part by increased residential mobility, leads to more congressional districts composed of like-minded constituents.

### **Media**

A fragmented media market may also breed polarization by enabling audiences to choose sources of information in line with their prior convictions (Mutz, 2006). Fewer people subscribe to newspapers or watch the national news than in the past; and media companies offer targeted, and often adversarial, content in order to gain a competitive market share (Wilson, 2006). “Fanning the flames of partisan and ideological conflict is central to the business model,” writes Jacobson (2007a). “Not only does this development make for a more polarized public sphere ... but it also enables people to adopt news sources that tend to confirm and reinforce rather than challenge their beliefs and opinions.” By choosing to cover certain extreme opinions instead of more moderate discourse, the media ends up playing “an important role in conferring legitimacy on a given range of views simply by covering those perspectives regularly, but not others” (Mutz, 2006). A related issue is the growth of nonpolitical media that are available on an ever-growing number of cable channels, radio stations, and Web sites. In today’s media-saturated world, there may be less likelihood of exposing a wide public audience to news with political content. The politically inclined can tune into C-SPAN whenever they want, while the uninterested can just change the channel to the latest reality show. This has the potential to further increase the divide between passionate political activists and those who are less informed and engaged (Mutz, 2006).

### **Gerrymandering**

Partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts is likely playing a role as well by making races less competitive and reducing the incentive for incumbents whose seats are considered safe to reach across party lines. The effect of gerrymandering on polarization is debatable, however, because parallel trends have occurred in both the House and the Senate, and Senate boundaries are fixed. Nonetheless, even a small effect could be highly relevant since many important political developments happen at the margins (Mann, 2006).

### **Changing Behaviors in Congress**

Finally, some scholars attribute polarization at least in part to changes in the institutional behaviors in Congress. These changes include the rising power of party leaders to enforce discipline, control the agenda, and determine committee assignment; increased usage of restrictive rules; and the decline of meaningful deliberation (Layman et al., 2006; Mann and Ornstein, 2006).

### Rise of New Interest Groups

An important driving force may be the rise of new interest groups that are divided on issues of rights or morality. This stands in contrast to traditional interest groups that advocate for material matters where pork-barrel politics are used to facilitate compromise. The new interest groups are deeply divided on symbolic issues for which it is difficult to find common ground. Moreover, these activists end up asserting a large influence on the selection and election of candidates (Wilson, 2006). Candidates are selected in party primaries and caucuses, and the party activists have come to play a disproportionate role in these elections as voter turnout rates in primaries tends to be low. Even in general elections, candidates count on the activists' financial support and mass mobilization efforts. These party activists have become not only more influential in recent years but also more polarized in terms of ideology and policy (Layman et al., 2006). In sum, more polarized activists with more influence on candidate selection and election have contributed to growing polarization. Intensity and extremity go together: "The people who participate are for the most part those who care intensely about some issue," and this promotes polarization because "the people who care deeply also tend to have extreme views on the issues they care deeply about" (Fiorina et al., 2006). Thus, there is a selection bias in the distribution of participation, as the extremes are overrepresented in the political process at the expense of the center.

### Primary Elections

Along these same lines, congressional primaries contribute to polarization because candidates tend to adopt more extreme positions in order to fight off challengers and appeal to loyal—and partisan—primary voters. Although they moderate their positions for the general election, this moderation is slight because candidates cannot afford to be viewed as flip-flopping on too many issues (Burden, 2001). In the end, this leads to the election of more extreme candidates and contributes to polarization in Congress.

Elite polarization may be a cause of mass-level polarization, although it is likely that there is significant interaction and two-way causality. According to Layman et al. (2006), "The policy positions of the parties' elites help citizens determine 'what goes with what' in terms of their own political and policy attitudes." Similarly, "increasing ideological differences between the parties in the electorate encourage and reinforce more ideologically extreme policy stands by elected representatives" (Layman et al., 2006). For all these complexities, the data show that polarization among elites and in Congress began in the 1970s and did not make a pronounced appearance in the electorate until the 1980s (Layman et al., 2006). Ultimately, voters can only respond to the candidate choices they have, and "the choices offered by more polarized, unified parties encourage polarized electoral responses." However, legislators must respond to their constituents' ideological preferences, and those preferences for candidates end up manifesting themselves in roll-call voting behavior (Jacobson, 2000). Thus the direction of causality remains uncertain, and the linkage between elite and mass partisan polarization may best be described as interactive.



## Consequences of Polarization

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### Is Polarization Good or Bad?

The word “polarization” may connote something bad, but its actual effects on the country are not entirely clear and may include some beneficial as well as detrimental consequences. From a historical perspective, this is by no means the peak period of partisan polarization in American history, and our republic has survived many previous bouts. Is the current pattern of polarization a temporary phenomenon that will peter out with new issues and political personalities, or are we experiencing an unprecedented brand of polarization that threatens our democracy in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate?

Since we know that partisan polarization has been increasing for several decades, it is worth undertaking a sustained inquiry into its consequences with regard to policymaking process and outcomes. Alongside the study of consequences, more research is needed regarding institutional reforms that might move our system in a less polarized direction, including an assessment of the benefits and risks of such reforms. By moving the study of polarization in this direction, policy and opinion leaders might learn whether the United States would be better served by tinkering with the institutional arrangements that define our representative democracy.

As the research agenda is pursued, it is important to remember that partisan polarization may have different implications depending upon the relative strength of the two parties and the extent to which either controls the multiple power centers of government. Evenly divided polarization is different from lopsided polarization, the former being more typical of the U.S. experience in the past dozen years. Moreover, when the White House and Congress are led by the same party, the ramifications of polarization may be unlike periods when the country experiences divided government.

We begin with an assessment of what we know—and suspect—about the positive and negative consequences of polarization, and then highlight some key unanswered questions that need to be addressed.

### Positive Consequences

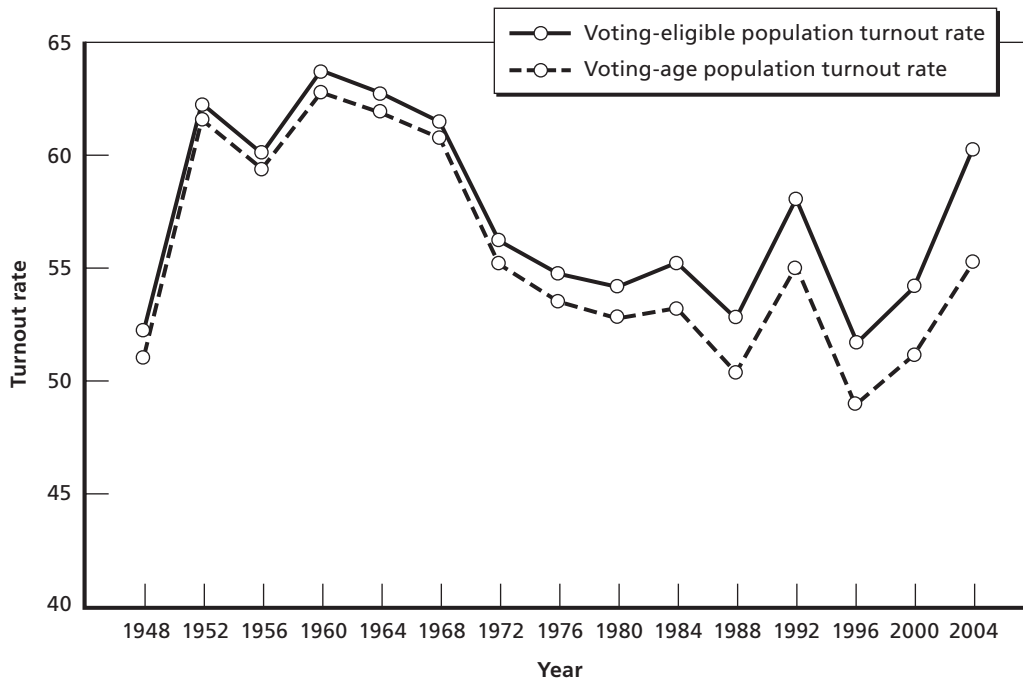
One of the apparent virtues of America’s current bout of polarization is that strong and distinct parties are presenting clear options to voters. Fifty years ago, the two political parties in the

United States had been criticized for being too similar. In contrast, today's polarized parties tend to offer divergent platforms and messages that voters can more easily distinguish.

Some scholars argue that simpler choices may help citizens understand what is at stake in an election, thereby encouraging them to participate in the democratic process by voting, working on campaigns, voicing their opinions to candidates and elected officials, and making contributions to candidates and causes (whether in the form of money or time). There is considerable evidence that public participation in American politics has increased with heightened polarization. As shown in Figure 3.1 below, eligible-voter turnout in the 2004 presidential election was quite high by U.S. standards (reaching 60 percent), returning to some of the high rates experienced in the 1950s and 1960s (Abramowitz, 2006).

Polarization may also have the virtue of clarifying political mandates and rewarding (and punishing) leaders who deliver (or fail to deliver) on their mandates. When parties and politicians take clear stances on issues, it is easier for media professionals and interest groups to inform voters—sometimes quickly—as to whether elected officials are delivering on their pledges. If voters know what a candidate stands for, they may be more likely to hold him or her accountable for following through on campaign promises (Layman et al., 2006). Although it is not always preferable for politicians to focus only on what they promised to do rather than address unexpected issues or long-standing problems whose solutions may be unpopular, it is generally considered healthy for a democracy to hold officials accountable for pledges they make in election campaigns.

**Figure 3.1**  
**Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1948–2004**



SOURCE: George Mason University, United States Election Project,  
[http://elections.gmu.edu/turnout\\_rates\\_graph.htm](http://elections.gmu.edu/turnout_rates_graph.htm)

RAND OP197-3.1

Polarization may also have some advantages for the conduct of political campaigns. When political parties take similar or ambiguous positions on issues, campaigns may focus more on the candidates' personalities and tactics than on their governing philosophies. Ambiguous stances may also be advantageous when parties are vulnerable and candidates can concentrate on attracting swing voters, whose concerns may be unpredictable or less extreme. As polarization pulls parties apart, candidates discover that their party affiliation begins to define their ideology and policy positions. In other words, polarization may help differentiate for voters the substance (not simply the style) of candidates (Layman et al., 2006).

The process of intense, adversarial debate among partisans is distasteful to some people who might prefer a more consensual political culture in which citizens highlight their shared values and downplay deep differences of opinion. But when politics is used as a vehicle to raise and shed light on authentic issues, it may strengthen the country in the long run. It may be possible to have a well-functioning representative democracy with strong, polarized parties as long as we have effective procedures that foster public participation and resolve conflict. The framers of the U.S. Constitution devised a set of procedures that have worked fairly well and that may be adaptable enough to endure even the intense period of partisan polarization that we are now experiencing.

## Negative Consequences

Among the negative consequences of polarization, legislative gridlock is one that is most commonly mentioned and that has received considerable study. The so-called "gridlock hypothesis" asserts that polarization is a contributing factor to increased gridlock. Gridlock has been defined as "the share of salient issues on the nation's agenda left in limbo at the close of each Congress" (Binder, 2000). Using this measure, it appears that gridlock rose between the 1940s and 1990s (Binder, 2000). Studies of lawmaking productivity find that Congress enacted more significant pieces of legislation when it was less polarized. For example, one study found that the least polarized congressional term produced between 60 percent and 166 percent more legislation than did the most polarized terms, depending on how the statistical model is specified (McCarty et al., 2006).

Although this line of research indicates a real problem, findings are difficult to interpret without a better measure for optimal "gridlock." Furthermore, whether we have too much gridlock is debatable; sometimes it is best when Congress decides *not* to pass a law on a salient issue. It is possible for a president to move his proposals through a polarized Congress, as evidenced by President Bush's victories on tax cuts, education, Medicare, energy, highways, and farm legislation. In contrast, he has been unable to move legislation on Social Security, clean air, and immigration.

A key aspect of the gridlock hypothesis is the rapidly diminishing number of centrists in the House and Senate (Binder, 2000). Historically, it is often centrists (ideological moderates) from both parties who build bridges between the more extreme elements of the two parties. Centrists can be seen as the glue for the bipartisan collaborations and compromises that are necessary for lawmaking to proceed. The number of centrist legislators has declined as more legislators sense political risk in bipartisan activity.

A more troubling possibility is that the quality of lawmaking is damaged by partisan polarization. There is clear evidence that the polarization of Congress has been accompanied

by procedural changes in how the leaders and members do their work. Not all the changes appear to be models of deliberative democracy: more use of closed rules on floor votes (few or no amendments are permitted), exclusion of the minority party from some committee-level deliberations (e.g., House–Senate conference committees), and widespread use of the filibuster threat in the Senate on ordinary policy matters (Mann and Ornstein, 2006). It may be reasonable to assume that a less deliberative process weakens the substantive quality of lawmaking, but that hypothesis has yet to be tested.

Data also suggest that partisan polarization is adversely affecting the independence of the federal judiciary. There have been greater delays in the confirmation of federal judicial nominations and more vacancies on the bench (Binder, 2005). As presidents of both parties nominate more ideologically extreme candidates for judicial posts, the resulting controversy about the role of ideology in judicial administration may be adversely affecting the credibility of our judiciary. What has not yet been demonstrated is whether polarization per se is eroding the substantive quality of federal judges' decisions.

Polarization undermines unified U.S. leadership in foreign policy, and thus could in turn damage the nation's standing in the world (Beinart, forthcoming). "Sharpened debate is arguably helpful with respect to domestic issues, but not for the management of important foreign and military matters. . . . A divided America encourages our enemies, disheartens our allies, and saps our resolve—potentially to fatal effect" (Wilson, 2006).

Elite polarization on foreign affairs is also particularly significant in terms of its ability to polarize the general population. Foreign policy is complicated and inherently more secretive than most aspects of domestic policy. Ordinary voters cannot possibly have access to the full range of information that leaders have, and many are apt to take their cues from elites in ways that they may not necessarily do for domestic issues.

The war in Iraq is a salient example of popular polarization on national security. In 2004, the gap between Republicans and Democrats on support for the war reached 63 percentage points; this split was much higher than for prior wars in Korea, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and even Vietnam, where the gap averaged only 5 percentage points (Jacobson, 2007a).

## Key Unanswered Questions

One of the shortcomings of the growing literature on polarization is that existing studies do not trace the impacts on the day-to-day lives of citizens. An unstated assumption in much of the literature is that any change in our democracy due to polarization must be undesirable. But even where research has determined actual consequences of polarization, the connection of those consequences to people's daily lives is uncertain. For example, in some policy areas, more legislative gridlock may be a good thing. We therefore suggest a future research agenda aimed at establishing whether and how polarization impacts the well-being of citizens.

In order to move research in this direction, the benchmarks for policy success may need to be modified. The existing literature often uses as a gold standard the policy favored by the median member of Congress or the median voter, presumably because a democracy should not favor extreme views. However, our nation's history demonstrates that centrist ideology does not always produce the best public policies. Slavery, for example, was not abolished by the work of centrists. We suggest a future research agenda that uses alternative criteria such as economic

efficiency and distributional justice (rather than, for instance, the median voter's preference) to determine policy success.

Of particular concern is that polarization may prevent thoughtful consideration of long-term policy challenges that can be solved only with bipartisan compromises; examples include the growth of entitlement spending, Social Security solvency, and health care reform (Galston and Nivola, 2006). Tighter links between constituent and party ideology mean that fewer members are cross-pressured by constituency on one hand and party on the other. "The disappearance of cross-pressured members changed the bargaining process in Congress. . . . [C]ompromise on divisive issues became more difficult. [And] the few cross-pressured members that remain" have diminishing influence in a polarized Congress (Fleisher and Bond, 2000).

One example of such a long-term policy challenge is much-needed federal civil service reform. The National Commission on the Public Service (2003), also known as the Volcker Commission, made several recommendations—particularly those addressing reorganization, political leadership, and a strengthened civil service—that may be impossible to enact until the intense partisan polarization of recent years subsides. If polarization devalues the importance of objective policy analysis, then it may slow civil service reform because there is no demand for it, and it may also lessen the impact and usage of fact-based information that the civil service can produce. It is also possible that a highly politicized environment affects civil servants' feelings of efficacy and/or increases rates of attrition, thereby reducing the quality of government.





## Potential Remedies

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### Solutions to Curtail Polarization

A causal connection may exist between polarization of ordinary Americans and polarization of the political elites, but the direction of this relationship is far from obvious. Polarization is likely a combination of bottom-up divergence of preference in society and top-down signaling by the political elites. If we decide that we want to reduce polarization, the solutions may require measures aimed at both elites and the lay public. Moreover, some solutions may reduce polarization per se, while others may simply mitigate polarization's adverse consequences.

A number of solutions have been proposed to alleviate polarization both in Congress and in society at large. We are cognizant of the obstacles to making these changes, and we do not presume to suggest that the following remedies would be easy to implement. In fact, it is likely that Congress itself—a highly polarized body—would have to take ownership of these issues in order to effect the powerful institutional changes that may be required.

Nor are we suggesting that polarization should necessarily be curtailed. Much more needs to be learned about the positive and negative consequences of polarization, and about the suggested remedies, before interventions are attempted. Here, we briefly survey the key ideas and solutions as part of an early-stage discussion.

### More Centrists in Congress

Historically, centrists bridged the gap between the parties and negotiated essential compromises. Inducing more centrists to serve in Congress might help to mitigate—and perhaps even begin to reverse—polarization. Although it is difficult to generate more centrists or more centrist-like behavior, the following ideas have been suggested:

- Reform the primary process to encourage moderate candidates. Methods for doing this could include holding more open, semi-open, or semi-closed primaries. (Semi-open means all voters may choose which primary to vote in but must declare their choice of party before voting; semi-closed means unaffiliated voters may participate.) In sum, if independents were allowed to vote in all primary elections, more centrist candidates might prevail; if more moderates were on the ballot, more moderates might be elected; and the forces that often dominate primaries and produce more-extreme candidates—such as

“issue” advocates (i.e., activists concerned with policies pertaining to polarizing issues such as abortion, immigration, or gay marriage), strong partisans, and large campaign donors—might exert less influence.

- Competitive congressional districts, characterized by balanced partisan composition, may favor more moderate members than do “safe” (noncompetitive) districts (Mann, 2006). In theory, one could modify congressional redistricting procedures to create more competitive districts (Fiorina et al., 2006; Mann and Ornstein, 2006). One option is to redraw boundaries; another is to have some representatives elected at large from wider geographic areas. A frequently discussed option is to give redistricting power to an independent commission, as is done in Iowa and Arizona.
- Create incentives for centrist behavior by those who might typically be considered extremists. This could be accomplished by strengthening members relative to party leaders. Mechanisms include taking control of the Rules Committee away from the Speaker of the House, limiting the use of closed rules, and creating means to ensure more equitable representation by both parties on conference committees.

### **A More Deliberative Process**

If polarization is damaging to meaningful debate, then a solution might be to encourage a more deliberative process in Congress. This would require a critical mass of members to recognize the value of the institution as a deliberative body and subsequently take responsibility for enacting difficult changes. Options include the following:

- Change congressional voting procedures, rules, and committee assignments to produce a process that is more amenable to deliberation. For example, encourage more open rules and fewer filibusters on policy matters, and mandate minority participation in conference committees.
- Introduce institutional mechanisms to expand the time allotted for formal deliberation, including increasing the days that Congress must be in session each week. Congress’s schedule might be changed so that members work two full weeks and then have two full weeks off, rather than the current Tuesday through Thursday routine (Mann and Ornstein, 2006). This could provide time for extended debate without reducing the total time members spend in their home districts. It might also encourage members to interact socially with colleagues, including some across the aisle.
- Create more bipartisan commissions to tackle the tough, long-term problems that are currently characterized by gridlock and for which neither party wants to take sole responsibility.

### **Increase Citizen Participation**

Although polarization has been associated with increasing rates of political participation by informed citizens, there remains a large segment of the American population that does not

participate in politics at all. As the parties have worked hard to increase participation among their base voters, many true independents and moderates with weak party affiliations remain on the sidelines. If more independent and moderate voters became active in politics, it might be easier for centrist candidates to win primaries. New blocs of unaffiliated voters can create incentives for candidates to move to the center (Fiorina et al., 2006).

With this in mind, increasing moderate citizens' participation in the democratic process could help mitigate polarization. It might also encourage candidates to moderate their positions and elected officials to engage in centrist legislative behaviors such as forming bipartisan coalitions and brokering compromises.

- Measures to improve voter turnout in primary elections would likely prevent strong partisans from exerting disproportionate influence on candidate selection. Possible mechanisms for increasing voter turnout include allowing registration on election day, electronic voting, holding elections on Saturday, making election day a federal holiday, or mandatory voting. However, if measures to boost turnout cause more participation by partisans as well as moderates, the overall effect on overall polarization may be minimal.
- U.S. demographic trends may work naturally to alleviate polarization. For example, Latinos are one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the country but traditionally have had low rates of voter turnout. Latinos are a heterogeneous group, and neither party has been able to fully capture the Latino vote. Greater Latino participation will likely cause both parties to reconsider positions and possibly move to the center on some issues (Fleisher and Bond, 2000).
- A more fundamental yet promising strategy to reduce polarization would be to engage more citizens in local politics, including exercises in deliberative democracy where the influence of partisanship is weak and citizens can learn about issues and acquire the skills of effective political participation. If citizens learn how to approach local politics in a nonpolarized manner, they may be more likely to demand similar behavior from their elected representatives.

## Reward Balanced Media Coverage

If the mass media are exacerbating polarization, then altering their influence and tone might be helpful. Although it is unconstitutional to restrict free speech, small changes and new incentives could begin to challenge the prevailing business models.

- The *Crossfire* phenomenon has had a considerable influence on how issues are being framed,<sup>1</sup> and a switch from strident argument to measured debate might have an impact on both viewer expectations and the quality of information presented. One way to accomplish this is by creating a dynamic in our culture that rewards accurate and balanced news. For example, one could envision a rating system developed by think tanks and funded by philanthropists that scores each network on the quality and objectivity of its coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> *Crossfire* was a program on CNN from 1982 to 2005 on which left- and right-wing pundits debated.

- Invest in civic education so that American schoolchildren are taught to respect two sides of an argument and to develop the ability to distinguish substance from impassioned nonsense.

## Future Directions

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Partisan polarization is a real phenomenon in contemporary American politics. We believe that the emphasis on research now needs to shift from causes, dimensions, and characteristics of polarization to an understanding of its consequences for the operation and health of the U.S. political system.

The benefits of polarization may include a political system with more accountability, in which elected officials are assessed in terms of how well they do, or do not, perform in office (i.e., do they keep their campaign pledges?). That said, legitimate concerns have been raised about whether polarization is creating a political impasse over key unresolved issues and harm to our judicial system.

The major unanswered questions concern whether the substantive quality of lawmaking has declined and, if so, what steps can be taken to meaningfully reduce polarization without adverse side effects. Before we tinker with our representative democracy, we need to better understand how well the policies we adopt fare on key criteria such as economic efficiency and distributive justice.

As research into the policy consequences of polarization expands, we suggest that some attention be devoted to policy outputs that extend beyond new legislation and budgetary allocations by the federal government. For example, we need a better understanding of how polarization affects the quantity and substance of rulemaking, regulations, and judicial decisions. We also need to examine the effects of partisan polarization at the state and local levels of government, how much polarization is complicating the conduct of defense and foreign policy, and precisely how polarization affects different policy areas.

As the political parties grow in strength, it is worthwhile to consider the ramifications for other institutional actors in our political process. Is stronger partisanship weakening the role of career civil servants in our political system? When issues are analyzed more intently through the lens of partisan gain or loss, will the value or contribution of objective scientific information and policy analysis decline? Are there certain types of chronic, long-term issues that are unlikely to be adequately addressed in a polarized political environment (e.g., deficit control, Social Security reform, and civil service reform)? It is critical to begin examining the possible effects of polarization on long-range fiscal, foreign, and entitlement policies. These are difficult issues to resolve in the current polarized environment, especially given that the parties hold thin margins and are reluctant to make sacrifices that will alienate their bases.

We wonder if polarization is shifting the analysis of public policy away from objective professional sources and instead to policy shops within ideological think tanks, interest groups, and even the parties themselves. Is it the case that policy issues requiring nuanced technical and economic information are increasingly being resolved on partisan grounds? It may be

useful to examine how scientific and policy-analytic information is—or isn't—used and processed differently by decisionmakers in a polarized political environment. Decisionmakers in a democracy face difficult choices that are filled with competing signals and information. How do decisionmakers weigh their options in a polarized environment such as the one that exists today? Do members of Congress change their assessment criteria and the types of information they use to make decisions?

Launching research activities to address these questions will not be easy, but we believe that polarization has become a force powerful enough to require some answers. At the same time, we should note, and take comfort in the fact, that the framers of our Constitution designed a political system that has already succeeded in surviving several waves of partisan polarization. We will likely survive this one as well.

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